

Does Dido's curse work?

Ellen O'Gorman

Poor Dido! But before she dies, she curses Aeneas and his descendants. Ellen O'Gorman explores the impact of this curse and its relationship with Jupiter's prediction of Rome's greatness.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, we are introduced to the hero Aeneas, a Trojan version of Odysseus, who 'endures many hardships over land and sea' (1.3) – not in order to return home, but to found the Roman nation in Italy. This is his destiny, prophesied by Jupiter in the first book, towards which he is guided by his mother Venus. Like Odysseus, Aeneas encounters strange people on his travels; in the first book he lands in Carthage in North Africa and meets the Carthaginian queen Dido. In the fourth book, they embark on a love affair, Aeneas appears content to settle down with Dido, and Jupiter is forced to dispatch the divine messenger Mercury to remind Aeneas of his mission to settle in Italy. What Jupiter wants for Aeneas is completely at odds with what Dido wants, but of course destiny and the gods prevail. Dido, abandoned by her lover, commits suicide, but not before she lays a curse upon the faithless Aeneas and all his descendants. But although Jupiter and Dido are on opposite sides in the struggle for Aeneas' future, what they have to say about that future – in Jupiter's prophecy and in Dido's curse – interacts in all sorts of ways. Sometimes Dido's curse appears to confirm or even modify Jupiter's prophecy; at other times her curse undermines the words of the supreme god. Above all, even though Dido loses everything in this story, her words still seem to have some effect on Aeneas' life and on the Roman empire: to that extent, her curse seems to 'work'.

Jupiter and Dido: prophecy and curse

Dido's curse falls into two parts; the first part, which has to do with Aeneas' future, appears mostly to be fulfilled in the second half of the *Aeneid*:

*If it has to be that he reaches his port,
The unspeakable wretch, and sails in to land,
And if the fates of Jove demand (poscunt) it be so, let
this end be fixed:
But (at) may he be harried in battle and war by a brave
race,
Exiled from his land, snatched from the embrace of his
son
May he plead for help and see the undeserved death
Of his friends; when he has given himself up to unjust
peace terms (leges),
May he not live to enjoy his kingdom or the lovely light,
But may he die before his time, unburied on the sandy
shore.
(4.612–20)*

Later in the poem we see many events which match these words: Aeneas lands in Italy, and is immediately embroiled in war with the Rutulians; compelled to seek help from the Arcadian king Evander, he later witnesses the death of Evander's son Pallas who has been entrusted to his care; finally, Aeneas accepts a peace with the Rutulians, after which the Trojans will lose their name and culture and take on the language of the local inhabitants. Dido's curse thus predicts a more negative – and perhaps more accurate – future for Aeneas than Jupiter's prophecy:

*He will wage a mighty war in Italy, and he will subdue
A ferocious people, and will impose laws (leges) and
boundaries on these men,
Until the third summer shall see him reigning in Latium,
And a third winter will pass with the Rutulians under his
dominion.
(1.263–66)*

Where Jupiter promises war and glory, Dido demands war and suffering; where Jupiter promises conquest, Dido insists that conquest will come only through compromise. Dido's words don't simply answer Jupiter's; she even seems to be aware that Jupiter has delivered this prophecy, as she makes the fulfilment of her curse dependent upon the will of fate. When she utters the command 'let this end be fixed', she recalls Jupiter's initial reassurance to Venus that 'the fates of your kin remain unchanged' (1.257–8). Dido's curse, then, operates as a sort of addition to the prophecy, signalled by the word *at*: 'he will wage a mighty war in Italy' (1.263) but (*at*) 'may he be harried in battle' (4.615).

Some of Dido's additions also threaten to undermine the divine prophecy, as when Jupiter says that Aeneas will impose laws (*leges*) upon the ferocious people, but Dido concentrates on how he first capitulates to unjust peace terms, also called *leges*. Similarly, when the curse and the prophecy turn to events after the end of the *Aeneid*, Jupiter emphasizes Aeneas' rule and domination (1.265–66), and Dido speaks of his untimely death and unburied body (4.619–20). Dido's words here help us to understand why Jupiter emphasized that Aeneas would reign for three years: this was a way of passing over his demise. This shows us that, while Jupiter's exposition of fate is not a lie, it is not the whole truth either. This is hardly surprising – Jupiter is, after all, delivering a speech of reassurance to Venus, the mother of Aeneas, and so, instead of drawing attention to Aeneas' premature death, he emphasizes the glorious career of Venus' grandson, Ascanius (with another telling transitional *at*).

*Until the third summer shall see Aeneas reigning in Latium,
And a third winter will pass with the Rutulians under his
dominion.
But (at) the boy Ascanius...
will rule for thirty long years with their rolling months...
(1.265–7, 269–70)*

Dido's curse, then, attaches itself as an addendum to the prophecy, but also exposes how Jupiter slants the truth in order to persuade Venus. This works against Jupiter's own representation of fate as something that 'just happens', a future which Jupiter simply reads out in an almost impersonal manner. Instead, we see that Jupiter has an interest in how events turn out, and that he represents the future to Venus in a way that furthers his interests. Dido herself points this out, when she speaks of the fates of Jove which *demand (poscunt)*; fate becomes what Jupiter *wants*, and Dido uses fate as a vehicle to work out her curse on Aeneas.

Dido and Hannibal: curse and oath

The second part of Dido's curse is directed at Aeneas' descen-

dants, and thus extends our vision beyond the *Aeneid* to the great span of Roman imperial history. Once more, Dido adapts and modifies what Jupiter has promised to Venus in book one.

*Next I call on you, fellow Tyrians: harass with hatred
His descendants and all his future race, and bestow
these gifts
On my ashes. May there be no affection, no treaties
between our peoples.
May some avenger rise up from our bones
To pursue the Dardanian settlers with torch and sword,
Now, in the future, at whatever time strength is available.
Shores against shores, waves against floods,
I summon, arms against arms; may they fight to their last
descendants (pugnent ipsique nepotesque).*

(4.622–9)

*To these [Romans] I set no limits of space or time,
I have given them empire without end.*

(1.278–9)

Jupiter's prophecy assures the Romans of an empire without end; Dido promises them war without end. The relationship between the two speeches is very similar to what we have seen earlier: while Jupiter emphasizes victory, Dido reminds us of the costs of that victory. But Dido also appears to be talking about specific wars, since she summons Carthaginians to harass the Trojan settlers. This refers to the devastating Punic wars of the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., which ended in 146 B.C. with Rome's destruction of Carthage. The historical circumstances thus match what both Jupiter and Dido prophesy, for the period of the Punic wars marked Rome's expansion into the Mediterranean – the beginning of its 'empire without end' – but the wars themselves left their mark on Rome. The first war lasted 25 years – 3 or 4 generations of Romans experienced fighting in that war – while Hannibal, occupying Italy for 17 years in the second war, inflicted traumatic defeats on the legions. Dido conjures up Hannibal – Rome's greatest enemy – when she speaks of 'some avenger rising from my ashes'.

But if Dido speaks of specific, Carthaginian wars, rather than war in general, her curse becomes detached from Jupiter's prophecy. Jupiter's words are valid for all time, while Dido merely refers to one historical episode, which ends in 146 B.C. This historical perspective, then, appears to limit the scope and force of Dido's curse. It suggests that we – and the Roman readers of Virgil's day – do not have to take Dido's words very seriously, because we already know that Hannibal and Carthage will be defeated.

Yet, if Dido's curse only refers to an episode in Roman history, it certainly conveys what was most memorable about that episode: the hatred that Rome felt emanating from Carthage. Hannibal appears as an embodiment of Dido's curse; he will arise from her ashes (4.625), just as she pours out her final words with her blood (4.621). Thus he is remembered by the Romans as *dirus Hannibal* (in the words of Virgil's friend Horace), not just a source of dread to Rome, but almost a supernatural force of hatred and vengeance, like a *Dira* or Fury. It's notable that Dido's portrayal of her avenger pursuing the Trojans with fire and sword is similar to the traditional image of the Furies pursuing Orestes. So, even if the Romans know, when they read Dido's curse, that her avenger is already defeated and long dead, does that mean they do not shudder at the memory of 'dreadful Hannibal'?

Over a century later, the poet Silius Italicus (who adored Virgil) composed a response to Dido's curse in his own epic, *Punica*. The central figure, the anti-hero, of that epic is Hannibal, who as a child swears eternal hatred to Rome. Silius draws on a longstanding tradition for the story of this oath (which probably also influenced Virgil's composition of the curse), but he makes it distinctive not only by having the oath follow the formula of the curse, but also by placing Hannibal in front of a statue of Dido when he utters these words:

*'I will pursue the Romans by land and sea, with sword
and fire,
when my age befits, and I will bring back the fate of
Troy.
No gods shall stand in my way, no treaties restricting
war,
not the high Alps or the Tarpeian rocks.
I swear this intention by the divinity of our god of war,
and by your shade, O Queen.'*

(Silius, *Punica* 1.114–19)

Of course, Hannibal will be defeated once more, only to be summoned to life again in the imaginations, and the poetry, of the Romans. Hannibal seems to be aware of this afterlife at the end of *Punica*.

*'For you are victorious
in battle only, the enemy remains: for me, it is enough
and more than enough
that the Dardanian mothers and the Italian land await
me,
while I live, and that they do not know peace in their
hearts (nec pacem pectore norint).'*

(Silius, *Punica* 17.610–15)

Hannibal's final words replicate at a psychological level the last words of Dido's curse – *pugnent ipsique nepotesque*. Although the Roman wars with Carthage will end, Dido and Hannibal continue to wage war in Roman hearts. To that extent, Hannibal has successfully fulfilled the curse of Dido.

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